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The End of the Historical-Critical Method

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WHEN MODERN THEOLOGY ADOPTED the historical-critical methodology as its *modus operandi* in Scriptural study, it unquestionably paid the price. It was thenceforth riding the tiger's back, with the danger of ending up inside. If cleverness with the text was to be the magical formula, then let the sorcerer beware of his apprentice! It was capable of becoming the Frankenstein monster that turns on its creator.

A notable little book has recently appeared in Germany which spells out these facts and then concludes with the flat judgment that the jig is up. *Das Ende der historisch-kritischen Methode* (Theol. Verlag Rolf Brockhaus, 1974, DM 9.80, 95 pages) is the title Gerhard Maier ventures to give his book—ventures, we say, because he dares thereby to take on a virtual army of opponents. His is a notable effort because it originates from a rather unlikely quarter in German theology, but one which, for that reason, cannot be regarded lightly. With an earned doctorate in theology, G. Maier is part and parcel of Peter Beyerhaus' Albrecht-Bengel-Haus in Tuebingen, a theological school with about 80 students. Beyerhaus is the *Rektor*, or president, of the University of Tuebingen. Accordingly, what Maier is saying here is bound to get a wide hearing. Since that is not likely to come quickly on our shores, unless the book is translated, we shall try to recapitulate its content and chief accents here at some length, elaborating freely here and there. The author has very relevant, tranchant judgments to render against a methodology that has troubled the theological waters for a long time—perhaps for too long a time! The church needs finally to leave this subject and move on with its God-mandated task of evangelizing the world. Maybe it can do so, once it again moves with assurance and confidence concerning the Biblical Word. Maier compresses a wealth of material into a small package. But small packages sometimes bear big, valuable gems.

A METHOD AT CROSS PURPOSES WITH ITSELF

In order to spell out plainly the basis for claiming "the end of the historical-critical method," Maier traces back in history—at least for our modern times—where the attack on Scripture's integrity and divine character began. Johann Salomo Semler's judgment on Holy Scripture, that it was to be dealt with like any other book, marked the onset of an almost uninterrupted two-hundred-year chain of irrational attacks against and charges of contradictions in the Holy Scriptures. The end result, states Maier, has been a general malaise, if not total break-down, in Christian theology. Working with historical-criticism's presuppositions, chiefly its anti-supernatural stance and the uncritical acceptance of extra-Biblical materials, it was inevitable that this method should have devastated the Bible's

own witness. It was inevitable, granted the presuppositions, which denied the supernatural nature of the Biblical text and threw open the whole question of its authority and meaning. With such a stance the location of the Word of God itself was open and free: Where was it to be found? How was it to be known?

The effects of the historical-critical method were far-reaching. Exegetes got an instrument into their hands that was destined to run wild, like the sorcerer's apprentice, and to dominate with pious(?) tyranny over the text's meaning. It simply would not work dutifully as theology's handmaid. In the process, dogmatics became but a bootblack in circles where it once had reigned in lordly manner.

Basic to historical-criticism's method and genius was its so-called "scientific" approach. This was its selling-point to a world that was starry-eyed over the "modern" and "up-to-date." With the advent of Hermann Reimarus (author of the *Wolfenbuettel Fragments* that triggered a sharp critique of the miracles in Scripture) and Gotthold Lessing (who defended Reimarus' application of the critique against Christianity) on the scene, there hardly was room in the inn for a theology that still depended upon God's revelation as actually given in the Biblical Word. Quite irrelevant in such a rarified intellectual atmosphere was the fundamental question of whether the historical-critical method was in fact suitable and applicable, not to say legitimate, in Biblical studies. Semler sold the theological world on the proposition that "the root of evil in theology was the simple identification of Scripture with the Word of God." Here was Rationalism's declaration of war against Biblical theology. The resulting "Battle of the Bulge" threatened to sweep Biblical theology off the face of the earth. Now was the time for Christian theology to marshal its finest and most loyal troops, well trained in counter-attack in all the Biblical studies, languages, history, archaeology, etc. Mere biblicism and fundamentalism, notes Maier, would have been helpless against the higher critical opponent. Accordingly, he indicts the historical-critical methodology on these grounds:

1) It is impossible to establish a "canon" within the canon of Scripture, no matter how this is done, by

- a) the familiar *was Christum treibet* formula, or
- b) the article on justification, *sola gratia/fide*, or
- c) the purportedly most ancient kerygma of the New Testament.

The simple fact is that the Bible itself supports no formula whatever, whereby the Word of God and Scripture are to be sifted like flour from grit.

2) Holy Scripture does not allow itself to be split down the middle arbitrarily into that which is human and that which divine. Semler's gimmick which judged that to be divine truth which was universally useful and applicable was subjectivism pure and simple. The same was true for Lessing's notion concerning the "necessary noetic truths." What guarantee, after all, was there against such "necessary truths," "universally acceptable," being anything but mere anthropocentric musings? No matter how it is applied, such an

approach splits the Bible wide open and down the center. Worst of all it preserves nothing of divine truth!

3) There is no other proper correlative for revelation than faith! To try to approach revelation as a thing, an object to be dissected and juggled, is to destroy the very thing of which one is seeking to get hold. The list is long, however, of critics who have tried to do just that. It stretches from Semler through Bultmann, Kuemmel, H. Braun, Strathmann, Ebeling, and the like—all of whom have internalized and personalized the content of revelation. Kaesemann sets against them the apt rejoinder: "How can a concept of truth be dependent upon the person receiving it?" When God speaks, the *hearer* is under obligation to *listen* obediently. The historical-critical methodology proceeds in precisely the opposite direction. It talks. It is constantly talking, demanding that *it* be listened to, even by God. Indeed, like an impudent, insolent imp, it flaunts this query in the face of God: *What* can He possibly have to say to us?

4) Kaesemann, while critical of some of the negative results of recent Biblical studies, tries to live with the historical-critical methodology. He hopes to anchor himself to the Scriptures, at least to that extent that it has escaped critical judgment, the neuralgic point where faith parts company with unfaith. The tacit assumption, or presupposition, is that genuine faith tunes in, or locks in, on that which is God's Word. But this is empty optimism, like trying to hold the front, or battle line, with a pea-shooter. It is a highly subjective procedure, if ever there was one.

5) The historical-critical methodology never won acceptance in the parishes themselves, where the believing Christians are. A wide gulf remained between sophisticated practising of the "art" and day-by-day parish experience. The result was a strange, schizophrenic situation that found parish pastors parading their historical-critical prowess among themselves on Mondays in their conferences, while on Sundays they sounded forth from their pulpits with messages that rang with Bible content and the language of orthodoxy. But it was a forked-tongue charade. In their hearts and minds they rejected the Scriptural Word which with their mouths they proclaimed so glibly as the Word of God.

6) Finally, the failure to uphold the *de facto* attestation of God's revelation in the Scriptural text and the failure, coupled with it, to assert positively that the only right corollary to revelation is obedient listening, not criticism. *Gehorsam* in German signifies not only obedience, but also attentive hearing. Revelation requires such listening, simply because God speaks. That attitude characterized all of the patriarchs and men of God from Adam down to the apostles in Christ's own time. Such hearing in faith requires, to be sure, the *sacrificium intellectus*, something which the historical-critical methodology vigorously opposes. It is quite convinced—contrary to what Luther proved in his *De servo arbitrio*—that the Scriptural critic is able to let his reason guide him into all truth, also Biblical truth. That is a stance according to which the norm or *criterion* cannot lie within the text itself; it must be adduced from outside the Bible. The "god" of higher criticism is no longer the God of Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob, but its own idolatrous creation. In truth, historical-critical methodology, when driven to its logical end, accomplishes what the enemies of Christ could not do: it has taken away the Lord and hidden Him, and hidden Him so well that it itself is unable to say where He has been laid or is to be found. In fact doubt reigns as to whether He even lived and died, let alone rose from the dead.

There can be no other verdict on historical-critical methodology than that it is irrational, unsound, and without foundation. In fact it is totally unacceptable from every point of view except that of its advocates and devotees. To mind comes the old ditty that lampoons narrow scholarship:

If your nose is close to the grindstone rough,
And you hold it down there long enough,
In time you'll say there's no such thing
As brooks that babble or birds that sing.
These three will all your world compose:
Just you, the stone, and your old nose.

THE ACTUAL DEMISE DOCUMENTED

If, now, the historical-critical methodology has in fact been shot full of holes, what brought it about? Who was present at its funeral? What are the facts that marked its last gasp? G. Maier times it with the appearance of E. Kaesemann's book in 1970, *Das Neue Testament als Kanon* (Goettingen). This volume, he contends, was epoch-making in its import. Kaesemann assembled significant pieces from fifteen authors, between 1941 and 1970, chiefly exegetes and systematicians who reflect on each other's territory in the light of the span of years since Semler's day. The conclusion was startling: the practitioners themselves had presided over historical-critical methodology's burial.

Among the exegetes were H. Strathmann, W. G. Kuemmel, H. Braun, W. Marxsen, and E. Kaesemann himself. Systematicians evaluated were H. Diem, C. Ratschow, W. Joest, G. Ebeling, and Hans Kueng. Two historians, K. Aland and Hans von Campenhausen, also come in for brief attention. Three authors, G. Gloege, O. Cullmann, and P. Lengersfeld, are omitted in Maier's review, though included in the symposium by Kaesemann, because Maier felt that what they presented was not essentially new or different from the positions of others already treated. We shall look briefly at each of Maier's selections.

Strathmann, known generally as somewhat conservative, felt that he could practice the historical-critical method with safety by taking recourse in Luther's famous *was Christum treibet* formula (something about which Luther speaks in his preface to *James*). This was his key to getting at the "canon within the canon." But the facts are, as any reader of Luther discovers, that Luther is always held by the Biblical text, and that, therefore, his "*was Christum treibet*" must be seen as an interpretive or exegetical/homiletical emphasis only, not an isagogical device by which Scriptural books or parts of books are to be excluded, or excised, from the Scriptures. Is it not true, Maier, counters, that just as Christ Himself attests the

whole Old Testament, so *all* of Holy Scripture actually presses Him (*Christum treibet*) upon every reader? Which part can be said not to do so?

Kuemmel, one of historical-critical methodology's oldest champions, resorts to another mechanism for finding a canon within the canon. He spurns simple acceptance of Strathmann's angle of pinning things to Luther's formula (so-called) and argues instead that the boundaries of the "canon" of the New Testament must always be determined anew through the simple, unequivocal attestation of the text to the revelation of Christ, quite apart from extra-Biblical thoughts or later Christian accretions. But uncertainties crop up everywhere for the form critic. To cite just one difficulty, how does one square the synoptic tradition with the so-called kerygma of the primitive Christian community? Maier asks in a very pertinent way if we are to assume that the disciples were aware only of this much, that Jesus had revealed *something*, but that they were in the dark as to *what* and *if* Jesus had said this or that, or done this or that.

H. Braun carried Bultmann's demythologizing method to its logical conclusion, questioning whether the New Testament could really be said to have a unified, single message or kerygma and, therefore, a simple, uncomplicated body of teaching. In a sense he is more honest than his mentor Bultmann, or even Barth. Indeed, Braun frankly admits, what Barth shields, that his key in doing theology is purely anthropocentric, not at all Christomonistic (let alone, Christo-centric). Braun is actually concerned for "what drives me" rather than for Luther's "*was Christum treibet*." Spoken candidly, like a true, self-confessed existentialist and humanist! If there is any key to the canon within the canon, it must be in the theologizer himself.

For Willi Marxsen everything hinges on the original, irreducible apostolic proclamation, something that can surface, in his opinion, through contemporary preaching as much as through ancient document. For Marxsen the historical-critical method represents the best and safest key for opening up the labyrinth of Scripture and ancient Christian tradition. The idea is that historical research, objectively done, should end in the cold facts upon which one is to ground the kerygma. In the process, of course, Biblical authority is totally set aside and extra-Biblical criteria are imposed instead. As a result the whole process ends in groundless and fact-less subjectivity.

E. Kaesemann opposes what he considers to be subjectivism in the above approaches to the hermeneutical task. He wants to emphasize the need for Biblical control. But he, too, wants to do so, while peering through the spectacles of the historical-critical method. But, through these eye-glasses, does the New Testament really form the basis for unity in the church? If so, then how shall one explain the differing Christologies, the sects, and the heresies in Christendom? How shall one get at the canon within the canon of Scripture, if one is to avoid ending in such a plethora of differing theologies? To Kaesemann the key lies in the teaching concerning the "justification of the ungodly." On the surface, his solution seems good and Scriptural enough, were it not that with this formula he simultaneously

assumes to himself the freedom, characteristic of an advocate of the historical-critical method, of setting aside other Scriptural teachings, even articles of faith. Thus a sophisticated kind of Gospel-reductionism is his answer.

While this list by no means exhausts the long parade of distinguished names in the Biblical studies arena, it is a genuinely representative group. Not inappropriate is the verdict of Maier that they are all subjectivists who have inflicted a new Babylonian captivity on the church. Each gets at the "canon within the canon" in a different way; but because of their commitment to the historical-critical methodology, they all come out at the same place. They have virtually destroyed the thing which they hoped to examine. The ailing body of Christian theology fares little better in the hands of the systematicians, since they too, Maier finds, are committed to the same methodology.

H. Diem faces the question of "canon within the canon" and contends, first of all, that on an historical-exegetical basis one cannot establish unity on this question. He dissociates himself from any of the "keys" devised by the exegetes. But his solution to what is, then, finally authoritative in Christian teaching is no less amazing. It is the "witness of the church," he claims. To his credit, it must be added that he affirms Scripture's own self-attestation concerning its proclamation. But Diem himself denies, like the exegetes, that such a unified, simple, single witness within the church is possible through Scripture's own witness.

Ratschow has a more complicated approach to getting at the elusive "canon." We have, he says, three key elements: the contingency of what various human witnesses have said; the spiritualized experience in the worship life of the church; and ecclesial resolution or decision on the basis of these two. Conspicuous by its absence in his list, however, is a frank avowal of Scripture's divine authority, along with just as frank a repudiation of historical-criticism's severe judgments.

W. Joest involved himself fully with all the ramifications of this method's exegesis in the hope of applying its "assured results" to Christian theology. In the end, he seems to arrive at about the same place as Kaesemann, in that he (1) accepts the validity of the historical-critical judgments and (2) conceives of the individual's spiritual experience in his encounter with Scripture as the unifying factor in the theological task. The fact that the Reformation's *sola gratia/fide* emphasis as central in this experience is no longer considered to be relevant to contemporary man by historical-critical theology, does not seem to alarm him. The figure of Schleiermacher, as a matter of fact, casts a long shadow over all of these exegetes and systematicians alike. For all of them the pious self-consciousness of the theologizing subject still appears to be the alpha and omega in the theological task.

G. Ebeling has established the reputation of being a discerning scholar, a good student of Luther's writings. He senses that there is no possible way of reconciling *Erfahrungstheologie* (experience theology) with a strictly Biblical theology. However, the lethal

process is again at work. With a debt owed to Bultmann, his teacher, Ebeling, along with E. Fuchs, seeks for a point of convergence between the historical-critical method and the Biblical text by contending that the key for harmonizing the Christ of history and the Christ of faith lies in the Word-event (*Wortgeschehen*), that is, what came to expression in and through Him. So, the faith of Jesus is ultimately the main thing, and thus He becomes for us less the object of faith than the source of faith. Ours must be a faith like Jesus' faith. Again, the hand of Schleiermacher, existentialistic thinking, and activity that centers on the theologizing subject are all too evident.

H. Kueng, in his effort at rehabilitating Roman Catholic theology in the light of the Reformation and renewed Biblical studies within the Roman church, has duly criticized most of these Protestant theologians. Quite appropriately he has labeled them as subjectivists, on the grounds that they have out-Bibled the Bible itself, out-Gospelled the Gospel itself, in their claimed quest for the "authentic" Word. Right though he is on this score, Kueng himself comes full turn like a lost hunter in the woods who comes back to the place from which he started: 1) with a verdict against the New Testament, which he describes as a *complexio oppositorum*, or complex of opposites; and 2) with a judgment that the intricacies of the task are so complex that only Holy Mother Church has the equipment to unravel them. So, committed as he is to historical-critical methodology's "findings," he settles for a solution fully as subjective—Rome does not change!—as that which he so eloquently opposes in his Protestant counterparts.

The two cited historians, K. Aland and H. von Campenhausen, leave the same dilemma. Aland contends that every church, tuned to its own self-understanding, also builds its own workable "canon." In spite of their official confessions, the churches somehow hang on to a single, common theme or faith. If he had the pure Gospel, as given in the Scriptural Word, in mind, one might give credence to his views. But working as he does under higher criticism's presuppositions, it is evident that such a "canon" is a very subjective commodity. Campenhausen offers no better solution. For him the "spiritual happening" which Christians have always discovered in their handling of the New Testament is the ultimate canon by which all of theology is to be measured and understood. That is no advance over Schleiermacher or his brood.

When Maier sums up this pungent chapter, he lists the following conclusions:

1) Historical-critical exegetes view the NT as a collection of writings from different witnesses, and by no means as a unit.

2) Since Semler's day they all are agreed that the Holy Scripture itself can in no way be identified with the authoritative Word of God.

3) Accordingly, the result has been that for the last two hundred years a hopeless search for the "canon within the canon" has been going on, really a tragic groping after the location of the Word.

4) Uncontrollable subjectivism has supplanted completely the authoritative Word of God.

5) Systematic theology, whether in the so-called evangelical churches or in Rome, is in a bad way. In the latter, its recourse, as of yore, is to the teaching authority of the papal office. In the former, it is to the "worship experience of the churches," which is a ball of wax that can be shaped this way or that.

The situation is desperate. Where is God's Word to be located? Christian theology has long departed from searching the Holy Scriptures with humble trust, with the attitude that responds with "it is written." Those committed to the historical-critical methodology sharply oppose all thought that Scripture is actually divinely inspired and authoritative, clear and sufficient for all times. The dilemma, as Maier puts it, is this: "If one can no longer be sure where the living God speaks, then I cannot any longer know *who* it is that speaks." Who will indemnify future generations for what has been lost as a result? Every thinking man ought to be ready to draw the loose ends together at the neuralgic point: the historical-critical method is not only destructive; it is self-destructive! But it has failed to undo the very thing which it tried to cut to shreds. The Holy Scriptures stand invincible. They offer no "canon within the canon." They simply resonate the truth spoken by the psalmist: "Order my footsteps in Thy Word; and let not any iniquity have dominion over me" (Ps. 119: 133).

If there really were a "canon within the canon," a "Word of God" which had to be separated from the Scriptural text, then the result would be not only a dividing of the Holy Scriptures from the Word of God, but also a setting of Christ Himself apart from the Scriptures (and so also the Holy Spirit) in a way unwelcome to each of them—in fact, one "Christ" from another "Christ." Thus, the whole assault of the historical-critical methodology on the Bible must be seen as an irrational, self-defeating sort of folly that has spelled its own doom. It is simply Docetism *redivivus*—the old heresy according to which Christ did not really come into the flesh, but a mere phantom-Christ was crucified. The only new factor is that this time the target is the Scriptural Word, which gives the appearance of being the Word of God, though it really is not; for what appears to be the Word of God is really only a phantom-Word. The Church must repudiate the new as it did the old Docetism!

A BRIEF IN BEHALF OF THE HISTORICAL-BIBLICAL METHOD

The church in our day needs to recognize that Semler's splitting of Scripture from the Word of God was grounded on purely philosophical grounds. It was a web spun from the threads of the German Enlightenment, English Deism, and French skepticism. A man cannot finally be separated from his religious faith. If that faith drinks from secularism's cisterns and is oriented toward its criteria, then man alone is the measure of all things—humanism pure and simple. A genuinely Christian scholar, on the other hand, sees not only the human factor in history and its events, but also, and above all, God's sovereign hand behind it all. Refraining from measurements based merely upon simple analogy with human experience, he recognizes God's power to act and intervene in human events. Thus, he views

with due regard what the Almighty has done in giving His revelation in Holy Scripture.

The Bible stands uniquely by itself, all other books and their credentials notwithstanding. The secularist, however, refuses to handle it as anything but another ancient document. At this point the Christian theologian strongly demurs, simply because the same mighty Lord, who broke through and into history by His incarnation, is the *Deus locutus*, who has spoken in the past, and the *Deus loquens*, who still speaks, in the Scriptural Word which He inspired through chosen penmen, as the Nicene Creed also attests, "Who spake by the prophets." The historical-critical methodology has a quarrel at every point where the supernatural intrudes. Its revolt is against heaven, against God Himself. At this point it is as arbitrary as it is irrational. There is only one proper, honest way of handling the revelation of God in Holy Scripture, and that is honoring Scripture's own testimony. That calls for what might be called the historical-Biblical approach. It respects all the grammatical, lexical, historical rules of interpretation, at the same time that it also believes in God's power to act in human history and affairs.

Because the sovereign God has been at work in the giving of Holy Writ, it is self-evident that the Christian scholar regards His activity with reverent awe. To opt for a kind of detached objectivity towards the text, purportedly to be only scholarly, is to deny God's freedom to act, rendering Him unable, for example, to show Himself to Moses at all, even in a fleeting glance of His back from a cleft in the rock as He passed by. When God speaks or reveals Himself, the correlative can only be obedient listening and faith, not criticism, whatever its form. We do not believe, because we first understand. Quite the reverse, Maier contends; we understand, because we believe—like Nicodemus—though what we believe is grounded on solid evidence as God gives it. No burying of one's intellect is involved but, merely a subduing of sinful, overweening pride. What God did in revealing Himself in the flesh, and in the Scriptural Word, was not for men's confusion, or darkness—a point at which Luther harps away—but that men might know and have the light of Life. No one was Christ's interpreter. Even His enemies understood clearly what He said and the authority with which He said it; but they would not believe or accept Him. Dare one say less for Holy Scripture, since it is God's own inspired, clear, authoritative Word? Scripture's harmony, unity, and meaning are not only attested by the Scriptures themselves, but, as Luther points out, the Spirit Himself—whose book it is—bears witness through it in every Christian theologian's heart that it is in fact God's Word. The single control factor, therefore, in all Biblical exegesis, the one thing that keeps Biblical studies from total disintegration (in view of the relentless assaults), is the Bible itself. Nothing else, history proves, serves to pull Christian theology together.

It is likewise significant that in a day like ours when the historical-critical method has successfully shredded the Bible in the hands of many of the established churches—at least among their theologians and clergy—there should be a concern for the inspiration

and authority of the Biblical text that cuts across the denominations. Quite apart from the aberrations which sects and false teachers multiply in the name and on the authority of the Biblical text, is the fact that the Bible is still having its way, making its impact, establishing God's Word among evangelically concerned Christians, by whatever name they are named. The witness of the Spirit through the Biblical Word has not been silenced.

Christian theology has no other basis than that God's revelation is true. The correlative principle, which is equally valid, is that that is true which the Holy Spirit teaches in the Scriptural Word. Were Scripture a mere witness to revelation, its authority would be deficient and doubtful. Many parts of Scripture—the epistles, *Acts*, the *Kethubim* (*Job*, *Psalms*, *Proverbs*), Moses' writings, the prophets, etc.—simply could not be handled in any other way than as God's revelation, without running headlong into Scripture's own attestation of divine inspiration. This is so for the Gospels as well, which reproduce the words and sermons of our Lord. These books remain the sole source by which we know what was said and what was meant by God. The idea that only certain parts of Scripture qualify as revelatory is self-contradictory. In the final assay of its worth and weight only Scripture itself can say what its authority is. It cannot be bound by arbitrary shackles unwelcome to itself and reasonable thought. The esteem in which our Lord and His apostles held the Scriptures is a matter of record. The accuracy of the Old Testament text is asserted; its Messianic prophecies forthrightly identified and affirmed; and accounts like that of Jonah upheld by analogous reference to the greatest event of all, Christ's resurrection. There is absolutely no ambiguity to the testimony which the New Testament writers themselves give concerning the *theopneustia*, or divine inspiration, of the text. Nor can there be any question about the Scripture's attitude concerning itself as revelation. In fact, it was a notion introduced by the Enlightenment, that the Scripture should merely "contain" revelation. Therefore, the only proper way of stating the case, says G. Maier, because of Scripture's inspiration, is that Holy Scripture is the revelation of God.

It should be self-evident that a man's exegesis of the text turns upon the pivotal question of whether or not he accepts Scripture's teaching concerning its inspiration. Luther looked upon the Holy Scriptures as consisting entirely in the inspired book of the Holy Spirit. That was the ground for his *sola Scriptura* stance and the authority which the Biblical text had for him. It triggered the Reformation which brought the Gospel to light again.

Scripture's so-called "problems" remained for Luther, as they do for us. Among these the question of the canon stands first. How do we know that the books we have are the authentic, inspired Word of God? The primary fact and principle here is the truth, according to Maier, there is not a single book in the presently recognized canon, which does not have canonical character or quality about it. The books of our New Testament have pressed themselves into sustained and continued high regard by their own weight—history and criticisms notwithstanding. Nor insignificant is the fact that God has

built His church, not on a tenuous and doubtful base, but upon the securest of apostolic documents that have fought off all attackers. Surely we could expect no less from the providential hand of God.

Scripture's nature as a thoroughly divine and a thoroughly human compendium of writings fits precisely the miracle of inspiration, according to which God gave His Word through His chosen penmen. Whenever verbal inspiration is explained merely in terms of subject-inspiration, or person-inspiration, it inevitably ends with a *de facto* denial of the miracle itself, in the manner of higher criticism. In truth, the farther one gets from simple attesting of verbal and plenary inspiration of the text by God through His prophets and apostles, the more one gets sucked into the clinging sands of philosophical speculation. Handling the so-called contradictions, mistakes, and variations of Scripture, is not so large a problem as it frequently has been represented as being. In the final analysis, the attitude of the examiner is more of an issue here than the integrity and infallibility of the thing being examined. What sticks in men's craw is the miracle itself, that this human word should be throughout and fully also God's Word. Doubt and unbelief deal in a similar way with the wonder of the fullness of the deity dwelling in Christ bodily (Col. 2: 9). That God tests the faith of a Christian scholar more than He tests his scholarship with Scripture's "problems," is the way Luther saw it. Scripture itself often suggests alternative solutions to the claimed inconsistencies or contradictions. When these are not immediately evident, a believing scholar suspends judgment in deference to the fact that it is God's Word with which he is dealing. Moreover, when God sees fit to include things like Satan's and (evil) men's opinions as part of the inspired text, so be it; for thereby God still accomplishes His own gracious ends and purposes for men's sakes and their salvation.

SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

The question of Scripture and tradition is not troublesome as long as the latter is not in any instance set above the former. There are valid uses and functions which tradition has served in the church from the time of the apostles onward. Martin Chemnitz devotes a whole section, beautifully clear, to this subject in the first part of his *Examination of the Council of Trent* (translated by F. Kramer, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971, pp. 219-307). In fact, this early tradition suffers a serious diminishing in rightful importance when later (official) "Tradition" is placed on the same level and received with reverence equal to that accorded the Scriptures. This is what the Roman Church did at Trent. Only the Scriptures are infallible, and all Confessions, as also traditions, are to be measured by it.

Much the same applies in the relation between Scripture and history. While Scripture, as God's revelation, is history-oriented, it is not history-dominated; it reflects history without error and does not depend for its validity upon the judgments of historical methodology, whether favorable or unfavorable. This is not to say that Scripture moves in a detached, a-historical realm all its own; but it is to say that the Scriptural exegete, in listening to both voices, Scripture and

history, lends an obedient ear in *that* order, giving precedence to Scripture.

History and historians may deal with Christianity as one religion among others, even give it precedence over others. But the fact is that it stands apart from each and every world religion, as surely as the natural is superseded by the supernatural. Natural religions in every case lack the special revelation which God gives only through the Scriptural Word. As a result, they not only are totally devoid of credentials, but they also fail to witness in any way to the grace of God in Christ Jesus who alone brings salvation. The veil is drawn before their eyes, a veil which is pulled away only by Christ and faith in Him (2 Cor. 3: 14ff.).

BIBLICAL-HISTORICAL: HISTORICAL-CRITICAL

Only an arbitrary myopia of the narrowest kind will deny the parallel course which the historical-Biblical method has run at many points with the historical-critical. Blanket condemnation of the latter, without specifics, or without credit for the positive fruits of scholarship would be both near-sighted and also foolish. Excellent scholarship and devoted scholars have fetched some notable returns, for which every serious Bible scholar, who looks objectively at the matter, feels indebted. Luther, for example, had only praise for Erasmus on his text and manuscript work. Establishing the text, according to the most scientific principles, on the basis of the best available manuscripts, has certainly advanced the cause of the original reading and our certainty of it. Contributions have arisen from both sides, the Bible's friends and its foes. Yet, it may also be said without fear of contradiction that, while in this way we enjoy additional advantages over the Reformers, the fact remains that there is no textual discovery which has altered even in the slightest the articles of faith, or faith's content, or anywhere cast doubt upon Scripture's teaching.

The same holds true for translations of the Bible. The veritable flood of new versions, while affording greater clarity here and there, has not disturbed Scripture's content, nor its ability to interpret or give its own meaning best of all (*Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*). New discoveries in extra-Biblical sources have likewise been helpful, usually in a lexical and historical way; but, again, however much the inscriptions or papyri, etc., may broaden our knowledge, they always remain auxiliary to, not dominant over, Scripture and its meaning.

Much the same can be said for the benefit that spins off from the history-of-religions research. It does not suffice to assert that Christianity and Christian theology rise like lofty peaks among foothills. Rather they tower like the majestic pyramids above the flat plain of their so-called competitors, completely set apart. Neither the certainty, nor the rightness, of the Christian faith is in any way dependent or contingent upon a comparative inter-relation with these world religions.

Literary and form-critical studies have likewise made contributions—sometimes grossly overestimated, in view of the fact that

many of their valid emphases were, in fact, old insights already known by Biblical scholars. But there is absolutely no ground or justification for Procrusteanizing the Biblical text and content to fit the size of each form-or literary-critic's notions. The Bible's purpose and meaning remain beyond the manhandling of these innovators. The faithful exegete has but one task, and that is to narrate accurately (*enarratio*) what the Scripture itself teaches. In every analysis, the Bible remains master and not servant in relation to scholarship. The prior question—what does God intend to say here for the sake of mankind's salvation?—is answered clearly with Scripture's own unambiguous asseveration (1 Cor. 10: 11; Rom. 15: 4ff.).

Every reader and scholar of Holy Writ will have his own manner of expressing its impact upon him. But its message is always the same, even though the conditions and circumstances of his life vary from the next man's, a thing which will shape the way he responds in reflective discourse. Three things at least, according to G. Maier, always remain constant. First, the Bible's purpose is an all-consuming passion for the salvation of mankind. It knows absolutely no alternative in this respect, allows no tolerance or deviation from what God's grace has given in Christ Jesus (Rom. 2: 4; 12: 20f; 3: 23 ff.; 1 Cor. 13: 4ff.; Mt. 7: 13f.; Jn. 14: 6; Acts 4: 12; 2 Pet. 3: 9, 15; Rev. 22: 14f.). Secondly, the Scriptures testify to and work the way of salvation, the *ordo salutis*, or *Heilsgeschichte*. God's Word leaves no particle of doubt or uncertainty as to His saving purpose, a purpose which has worked extensively (for all men) and intensively (for all sins) for the redemption of mankind. Nor is there any doubt that he who denies or rejects God's Gospel, denies to himself its salutary benefits and, in his tragic unbelief, lives over against the Scriptures in an a-historical way, as though they said nothing to him that matters. Thirdly and finally, there is a central pivot in Scripture on which all turns: Jesus Christ the Crucified. His death and resurrection mark a crossroads in Holy Scriptures and in history so vital and so cosmopolitan, that from it the bearing and distance of everything else is measured. Not insignificant is the historical fact that Christ's title on the cross was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin; for He belonged to the world, even as He came to redeem it, there on the city dump outside Jerusalem, at the center of the marketplace of the whole world. Scripture knows no other focus than Christ, though to imply that all else in Scripture is then peripheral, is to denigrate what Christ Himself exalts or upholds. Luther reminds us that while "Christ, Christ, should be preached above all else," it is true, too, that Christ Jesus brings all other doctrines with Him. So, says G. Maier lastly, "the more we prize Holy Scripture, the more glorious does He become, who gave it and who binds it to Himself, Jesus Christ."

Finally, then, in view of the fact that the end of the historical-critical method has been duly noted and attested from that locus where it first saw the light of day, should we not bring a halt to further viewing of the corpse? Would not the right and decent thing be to bury it now once and for all—and cease and desist from further

troubling and dividing of the church on the basis of something that once had its day but now has had it? Should we not now much rather resolve to know no other view of Scripture than that of Jesus, and no other Jesus than the one whom Scripture reveals?

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